

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 8 PARADE
Magazine

WASHINGTON POST
2 June 1985

A Stranger Came To Town

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By J. Anthony Lukas

TINY LINGLE suspected that something was wrong when the palm trees appeared in front of City Hall.

It was the spring of 1981, soon after the ice had melted on the Rum River and the snows had streamed off the pine-crested hills. All of a sudden, 10 palm trees and 58 other tropical plants materialized on the grassy strip before the municipal building in Princeton, Minn.

The exotic foliage, a gift from a Latin millionaire named Casey Ramirez, prompted mixed feelings in this city of 3100. "I think it's one of the greatest things that ever happened to Princeton," said auto mechanic Phil Griswold. But Edith "Tiny" Lingle, a leader of the Civic Betterment Club, had her doubts. "It doesn't fit," she said. "If they have them in Casey's culture, that's fine, but they are not part of this culture." To Lingle and others, Princeton seemed more a pine tree kind of place.

Casey was vague about how he earned all this money, claiming variously to be a gynecologist, a professional tennis player, a whiskey distributor, a major stockholder in a computer company and a CIA agent.

Only last October did a jury in St. Paul Federal District Court determine that Casey was none of the above but,

in fact, a cocaine smuggler. Convicted of conspiring to smuggle some 400 pounds of the drug into Florida, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison. His case is on appeal.

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